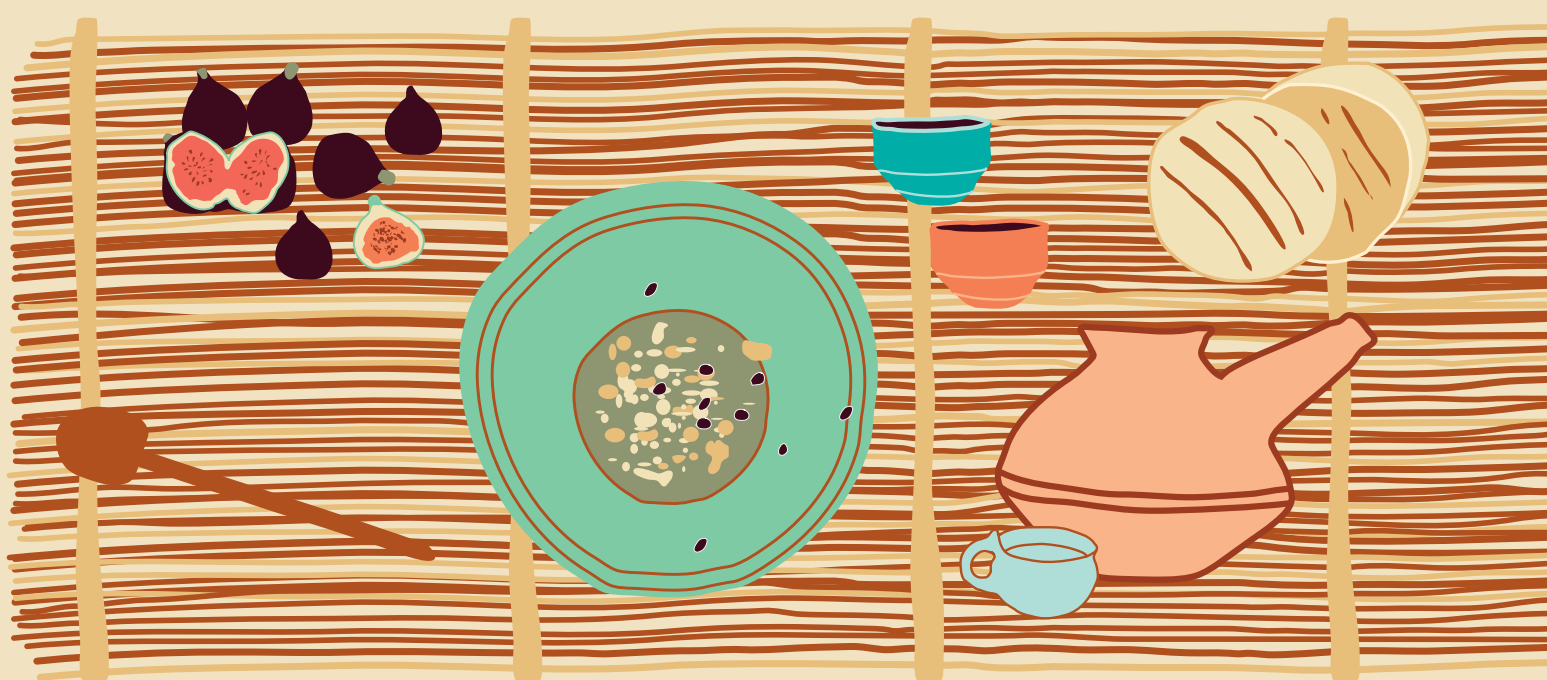


خواردن له رڼه‌لارې نړۍ كڼ



Food 
in the Ancient Near East

الغذاء في الشرق الأدنى القديم

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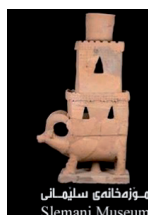
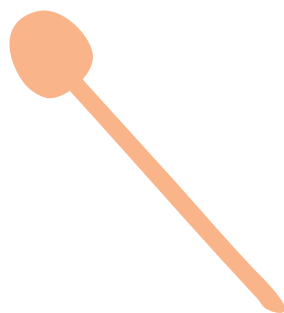


Illustration acknowledgements

Royal standard of Ur: Based on BM 121201. Courtesy of the British Museum. Cuneiform recipe tablet: Based on YBC 4644. Courtesy of the Yale University Babylonian Collection. Grain silos from cylinder seals: Based on Delougaz & Kantor (1996: pl.149). Courtesy of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. High-status feasting: Based on BM 124920. Courtesy of the British Museum.

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Introduction

The purpose of this series of educational boxes is to introduce teachers and students, of all ages, to life in the ancient Near East with the aim of enthusing everyone to engage further with the archaeology and history of this region and to care for, and help protect, its rich and diverse cultural heritage.

The boxes offer an introduction to three important elements of life in the past:

- Pots and People in the Ancient Near East
- Food in the Ancient Near East
- The Invention and Practice of Writing in the Ancient Near East

Each box contains written information, associated illustrations, and a range of activities to facilitate children's learning.

Enjoy the journey through time!



What's in the box?

- Small replica cooking pot: for **ACTIVITY 1**.
- Reed mat: for **ACTIVITY 1**.
- Template of cuneiform tablet: for **ACTIVITY 1**.
- Game cards showing different types of foods: for **ACTIVITY 1**.
- Models of fruits and vegetables: for **ACTIVITY 2**.
- Examples of charred seeds.
- Examples of bones found at archaeological sites.
- Examples of snail shells.

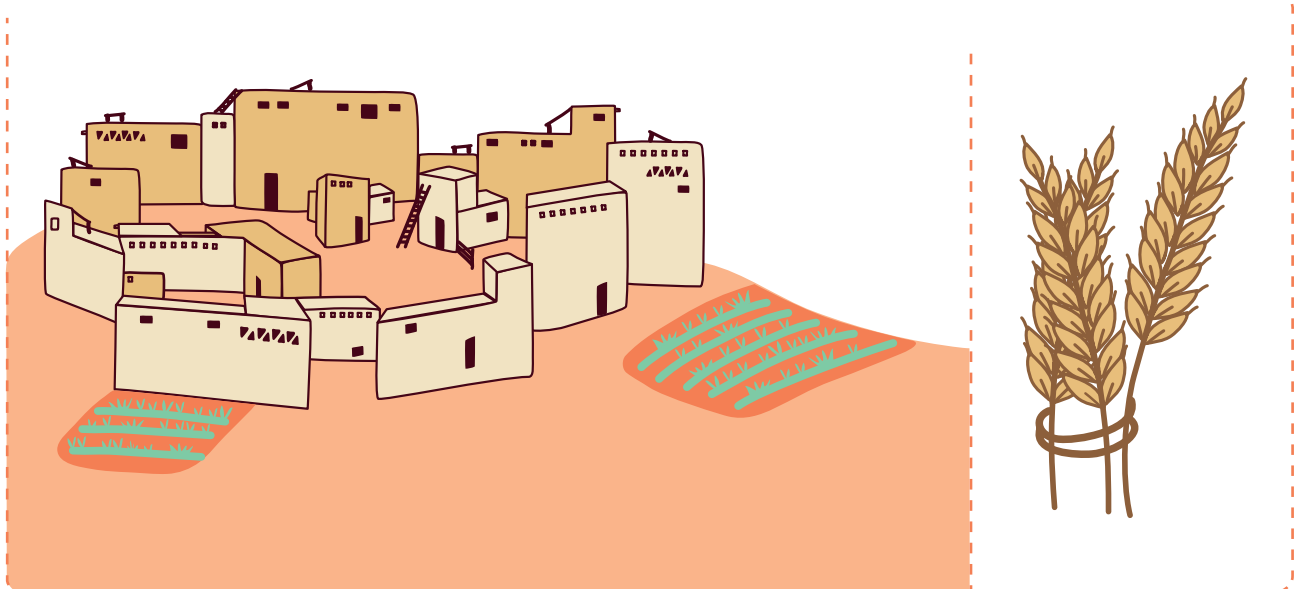
Agriculture and animal domestication

The story of food in the past, and how it got from the fields to people's plates, is important to understanding how we live today.

Some 10,000 years ago people began cultivating plants and herding animals. This first happened in the foothills of the Taurus and Zagros Mountains, not far from here, and on the south-east coast of the Mediterranean, a region that archaeologists often call the Levant. Cultivation means that, rather than just harvesting wild grains for food, people began saving some of the grains to sow later. Gradually they cleared land for fields, and wild plants such as wheat and barley were turned into domesticated crops.

Domestication means that the structure of a plant is changed from its wild variety. While the top of the straws of wild wheat and barley, for instance, naturally break up so that the grains fall to the ground and sprout, the ears of domesticated wheat and barley do not break up. This makes it a lot easier for people to harvest the grains, but it also means that the plants lose their ability to reproduce on their own. They become reliant on people to harvest them and plant part of the harvested grains in the next agricultural cycle. We can see these changes happening in archaeological grain. We can therefore tell whether certain grains were wild, cultivated, or domesticated, and therefore whether people in an ancient settlement were farmers or collected wild foods instead.

AGRICULTURE



People started herding animals around the same time as they started farming plants. The earliest herd animals that were domesticated include goats, sheep, cattle, and pigs. This happened within the natural habitats of the wild animals – areas where they were more common and where people had already relied heavily on hunting them for food. The eventual domestication of these animals meant that rather than having to go out and hunt an animal for food, people now kept populations of them near their homes under their control. This produced a reliable source of food, but one which required greater work input than hunting as farm animals need regular care and feeding.

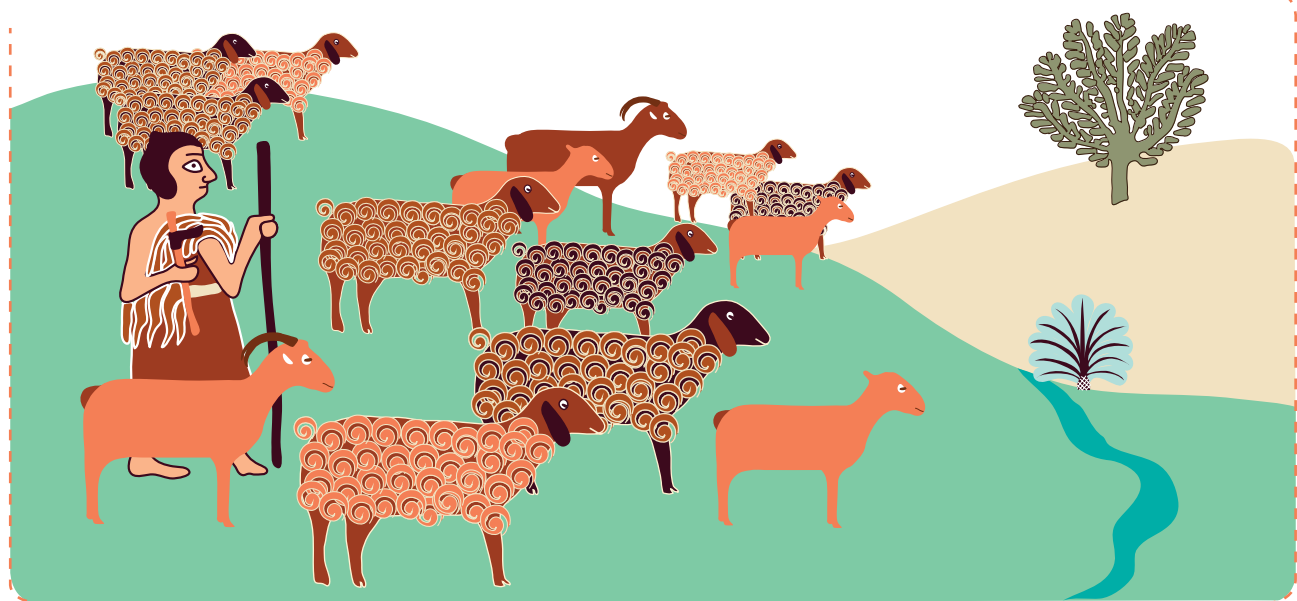
We can identify where and when this process of domestication happened through analysis of the animal bones left behind in ancient settlements. This is because:

- Hunters often target male animals. Males are often larger, meaning that people would get more meat from a single hunt.
- Farmers, by contrast, usually keep more female animals into adulthood. Females are important for the reproduction of the herd.
- Many animals become smaller following domestication.

Because of these factors, the age, sex, and size of archaeological animal bones can provide us with lots of useful information on the domestication process.



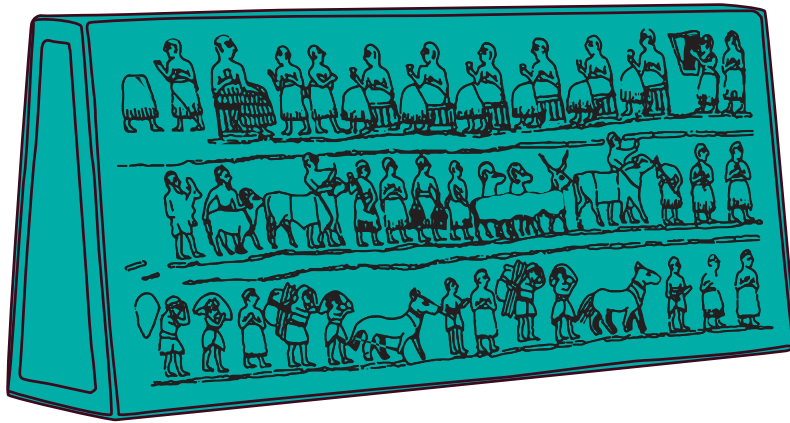
SHEPHERD AND HERD



Agriculture and livestock farming meant that people no longer had to move over longer distances to find food. They had to stay in the same place for most of the year in order to protect their fields from wild animals, to water and weed their garden crops, and to take care of their animals. In other words, people changed from being mobile hunter-gatherers to sedentary farmers. They settled the land.

People began living in villages that later grew into cities. Farming allowed communities to build up and store food surpluses, which allowed them to live in larger settlements and, in time, to develop more complex societies and economies.

ROYAL STANDARD OF UR



Food procurement to the serving and eating of food and drink. Elements taken from the Standard of Ur, southern Iraq, c.4,500 years ago.

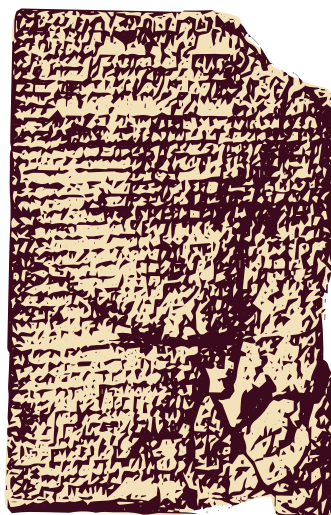
What did people in the past eat?

People in the ancient Near East had a rich and varied diet. They grew many different types of food in their fields and gardens, most of which we would still recognise today. They grew cereals like wheat and barley, pulses like lentils and peas, as well as fruit such as grapes, pomegranates, and dates. They also grew many different types of vegetables such as lettuce, leeks, onions, and garlic, and herbs and spices such as dill, mint, coriander, and cumin. Olives and flax were grown for both food and oil.

Communities kept herds of domestic animals for food. Meat was an important part of the diet and came mostly from sheep, goat, cattle, and pig. People also hunted wild animals to eat, including mammals such as gazelle and red deer, birds, and fish. They even hunted and ate turtles and snails! The types of animals hunted depended on the surrounding environment, the climate, the time of the year, or the ability of people to travel further, or to trade with groups of people further away.

Domestic sheep, goat, and cattle were not only eaten, but were also kept for dairy produce, such as milk, butter, yoghurt, and cheese. Bird eggs would also have been collected and eaten.

CUNEIFORM RECIPE TABLET




A cuneiform tablet containing recipes, c.3,800 years ago.

How did people prepare their food?

Most people cooked their meals in their homes. They had a hearth in the kitchen where they cooked stews in clay pots, and they had tannur ovens outside, where they made the flat bread that we also eat today. Barley bread was also used to make beer, which was the most common drink in the ancient Near East.

Meat could be cooked in a number of ways, such as by roasting, boiling, or stewing. The different ways meat is cooked depends on the qualities of the ingredients, the tastes of those cooking it, and the technology available. Roasting, for example, can be identified archaeologically by burning at the ends of bones in areas not protected by meat. Food could also be stored to be consumed later, for example by turning milk into yoghurt or cheese and by drying or salting fish. This allowed rich food resources that might only be collected at certain times or seasons to be spread throughout the year. Many of the small cups and bowls that we find in excavations were used for serving food and drinks (see Pottery box).



Although we know lots about the different types of foods that existed in ancient Mesopotamia, we know little about how these foods were combined to make meals. Our best evidence comes from a group of texts written about 3,800 years ago - the oldest recipes in the world! These offer 35 recipes in total, all of which are stews or broths. 30 of these are meat based (venison, gazelle, lamb, mutton, pigeon, etc.), while 5 are vegetable based (turnip, betroot, etc.).

One example reads:

"Meat broth. (1) Meat is used. Prepare water; add fat, (2) mashed leek and garlic, and a corresponding amount of onion."

The Mesopotamians certainly liked to keep it simple!

Some foods were not only produced by individual families for their own subsistence. Grain and beer in particular were gathered and produced in very large amounts by state and temple institutions (see Writing box). These goods were kept in large storehouses or silos and were given to people in exchange for a day's work. This form of food control and redistribution ensured that communities could survive periods of hardship and drought. It also provided the opportunity for social and economic inequality to develop; some people became more powerful than others by collecting and controlling surplus food. These people became the elites that governed the first cities and states.

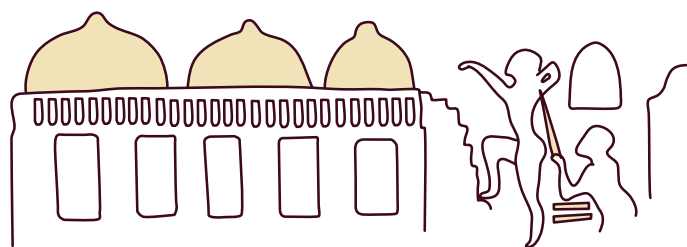


This educational box contains a cuneiform recipe template, food game cards, a small replica cooking pot, and a reed mat.



ACTIVITY 1: RECIPE GAME.

GRAIN SILOS FROM CYLINDER SEALS



Images of centralised grain storage from Chogha Mish and Susa in southwestern Iran, c.5,000 years ago.



How do we know about ancient food?

We find the remains of food in the ground when we excavate ancient settlements, usually as small grains and seeds. Cereal grains may accidentally get charred – for example, if they spill into a hearth during cooking, or if a house burns down with pots of grains stored inside. If they are charred, they do not decay. This means that we can still find charred grains and seeds in the ground that are thousands of years old!



Archaeological grains and seeds are as light as charcoal, and, in order to find them, we take the soil that we find inside ancient houses, and between houses, and we mix the soil with water. The grains and seeds are lighter than the water and will float to the surface, separating them from the rest of the soil which sinks. We then dry the grains and seeds and take them to the laboratory to look at them closer using microscopes. This allows us to identify the ancient plant remains by comparing them to modern grains and seeds.

Identifying the ancient plant remains is a bit like a puzzle. We usually only find the seeds of fruits, rather than the whole fruits, which means we have to identify fruits like figs and grapes from their seeds. Often, we only find tiny fragments of grains and seeds, and we have to look at them very carefully to identify them.



This educational box contains examples of charred wheat and barley grains as well as grape pips.

During excavations we also find the bones and teeth of animals. The skeleton of each of these species is slightly different because of the size and shape of that animal and how it moved, lived, and fed. We use these differences in the size and shape of bones to help us to identify which animal they came from. Some animals' bones are big and easy to find, but, during excavation, we also sieve the soil to collect the bones and teeth of small animals too, which are usually harder to identify. By looking at which parts of the animals we find and where the bones are found we can also understand how food was prepared and shared between people in the past.



This educational box contains animal bones found in archaeological excavations.



ACTIVITY 2: MODELS OF FRUITS AND VEGETABLES.

But it is not only seeds and bones that tell us about food in the past. We can also learn about how people cooked and ate their food from the houses that we excavate. These houses include hearths inside some of the rooms, and sometimes we find stored grain in pots, or a bread oven outside of the house, in the courtyard, just like today. Sometimes we also find rubbish areas – spaces in a settlement where bones, shells, and other waste are discarded after food has been prepared and consumed. Ceramic pots can help us to understand the practices of cooking and serving food, and how food was stored; some pots still bear traces of soot, from being sat in the hearth, while other pots still have remains of stored grains, or even burnt remains of a meal inside.

MUDBRICK HOUSE WITH TANNUR



Who took part in meals?

It is important to remember that meals are always social occasions. They involve family, friends, co-workers, and even whole communities – people come together to eat and drink. While eating and drinking, people talk, laugh, share stories, and much more. People eat according to specific habits and customs – while people in Britain eat using knives and forks, people in China eat using chopsticks, and people in Kurdistan eat rice with their hands and a flat bread.

These social interactions and shared customs happen every time we eat and drink, meaning that our food habits define how we see ourselves and others.

Social power

Occasions where food is consumed are situations where social power can be created. Although this is also the case in a family meal, it is most obvious in large feasts. In public feasts, people can negotiate their position within society. The person that provides the food, in particular, can gain social status. That is why feasts were so important in the ancient world!

It is through such enormous feasts that important people, such as kings, could demonstrate their power; their power to produce and gather enormous amounts of food, their power to provide for their people, and their power to bring together people from different places across their kingdoms.

Feasting in the past

King Ashurnasirpal II of Assyria, claims to have held a huge banquet to mark the opening of his new palace.

"...I treated for ten days with food and drink 47,074 persons, men and women, who were bid to come from across my entire country... from all ways of life... I did them due honours and sent them back, healthy and happy, to their countries."

At this feast, Ashurnasirpal claims to have prepared and served:

- 1,000 fattened head of cattle
- 1,000 calves
- 10,000 stable sheep
- 15,000 lambs
- 500 stags
- 500 gazelles
- 1,000 ducks
- 5,500 geese
- 10,000 fish
- 10,000 eggs
- 10,000 loaves of bread
- 10,000 jars of beer
- 10,000 skins with wine
- And more...

Feasts could bring people together, but they could also be used to highlight the differences between people. The rich and powerful people of the ancient world often ate and drank from elaborate, expensive vessels, made of gold or silver, but everyday people used the simple clay pots that we find so often in ancient settlements (see Pottery box). While the rich would eat at tables, reclining on ornate chairs, most people would usually have eaten sat together on reed matting on the floor.

Nobody can survive without food and drink! This means that the foods that we eat, the ways in which we eat and drink, and the people we choose to eat and drink with, are so important to understanding how people come to feel that they belong to a community.

ACTIVITY 3: GROUP DISCUSSION

HIGH-STATUS FEASTING

Elements from the Banquet Scene, or Garden Party, an Assyrian wall relief from the North Palace at Nineveh, northern Iraq, c.2,600 years ago.



ESSAY QUESTIONS FOR OLDER CHILDREN

- 1) When did farming start, and why is it considered such an important change in human history?
- 2) Which animals and plants were important for ancient Near Eastern farmers when producing food in the past?
- 3) In what ways did people eat and drink in the past, and how are these similar to the ways we eat and drink today?

ACTIVITY 1: RECIPE GAME

The Yale Culinary Tablets provide us with the oldest recipes in the world. They give us an example of what ingredients were used in Mesopotamian cooking, and how they were combined to make meals. Descriptions of feasts, such as Ashurnasirpal's, show us the types of food consumed at important events, while ancient Near Eastern depictions help us to understand how people acted at these events. Use all of this information to carry out the following activity.

- Split the class into three groups. These three groups should design and recreate a feast for an important visitor, such as a king or queen.
- Using the ingredients illustrated on the associated smaller cards, each group should decide on four ingredients to combine to make a main meal. These ingredients should be used alongside the blank spaces on the recipe templates to make new recipes of their choice, similar to the Mesopotamian recipes discussed in the booklet.
- One group should also be responsible for deciding a starter dish, another group for deciding a dessert, and another group for deciding which drinks should accompany the feast.
- Once the different components of the feast have been decided, the children should re-enact the feast using the reed mat, pottery vessel, pictures of food, and illustrations of royal iconography provided.

ACTIVITY 2: WHICH FOODS EXISTED IN THE PAST?

In the box there are models of fruit that we know from our everyday lives. Which of these fruits do we know existed in the ancient Near East, and which ones have been imported much more recently?

- Pears (grown locally)
- Apples (grown locally)
- Pomegranates (grown locally)
- Oranges (imported)
- Peaches (imported)
- Lemons (imported)
- Avocados (imported)
- Kiwis (imported)
- Strawberries (imported)
- Bananas (imported)

Now think about some of the other foods you eat every day. Which do you think existed in the ancient Near East, and which have only more recently been imported?

Some of the most widely consumed foods across the Middle East are imported, such as:

- Tomatoes (imported from the Americas to Europe c.500 years ago)
- Potatoes (imported from the Americas to Europe c.500 years ago)
- Aubergines (imported from southeast Asia c.1,000 years ago)
- Rice (imported from China and east Asia c.2,000 years ago)



ACTIVITY 3: GROUP DISCUSSION

Have an open discussion with the class about the food that they eat every day. Allow the discussion to go wherever the children lead it, but make sure to keep them on the right track. A few topics that would be interesting to think about are:

- Who produces and prepares their food?
- Where does their food come from? (Grown or raised themselves? Bought at the market? Produced locally, or imported?)
- What do they usually eat?
- Where do they eat? With whom?
- What different foods are available in different seasons throughout the year? Why?
- What is their favourite meal? What do they like about it? What ingredients are used, and would they have been able to make this in the ancient world?
- What special meals do they have in their families, or amongst their communities?
- Who brings and prepares this food?
- What is eaten?
- Where do they eat? With whom?
- Why are these meals different to their usual meals?
- In 1,000 years, what would an archaeologist find left over from both their everyday meals and from their more special meals?

